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TOWARDS THE FRENCH EMANCIPATORY GAME HISTORY

Alexis Blanchet and Guillaume Montagnon, *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France 1960–1991: Des labos aux chambres d’ados*, Houdan: Éditions Pix’n Love, pp. 448. ISBN 978-2-37188-029-0.

Abstract: This article is a critical reading of the book *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France* by Alexis Blanchet and Guillaume Montagnon. The book – divided into five chapters – explains the first three decades (1960–1991) of digital game development in France, stretching from scientific experimentation, through the rise and fall of console and arcade gaming industry, to the rapid increase in microcomputing and the emergence of a French gaming identity. Close to the increasingly popular emancipatory paradigm in historical gaming research, the publication relies on comprehensive and exhaustive material, stretching from the gaming magazines to interviews with French game developers. Even though the book does not delve into the cultural contexts around the popularity of specific games, it remains an essential work for readers willing to understand the processes contributing to the French digital game field’s state.

Keywords: French digital games, French Touch, Alexis Blanchet, Guillaume Montagnon, game studies

Since Hayden White’s critical study, we know that the description of one ultimate human history is impossible; conversely, there are only multiple histories with different scopes and writing styles.¹ The

last decade brought intensified attempts to turn back from “the ultimate history of digital games,”² which ultimately had been – American-centered. The enthusiast paradigm of writing digital game

¹ H.V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore–London 1973.

² S.L. Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokémon and Beyond*, Prima Publishing, Roseville 2001.

history, as Jaakko Suominen and Maria Garda note,³ started to give way to more nuanced takes on digital game diversity. The relatively new paradigm became the emancipatory one, including the voices of women, ethnic and sexual minorities, people of other nationalities than American or Japanese. Mirosław Filiciak even stresses that such a paradigm change allows the game historians to reach “beyond nostalgia” characteristic for historical game writing.⁴

Indeed, there is a significant paradigmatic change since the transitional Tristan Donovan’s book *Replay: The History of Video Games* (2010).⁵ Increasingly, more academic publications construe alternative histories of digital games, describing local game field developments. As examples, one can cite Juho Kuorikoski’s *Finnish Video Games: A History and Catalog* (2015),⁶ Alex Wade’s *Playback: A Genealogy of 1980s British Videogames* (2016),⁷ Jaroslav Švelch’s *Gaming the Iron Curtain* (2018) about underground Czecho-

slovak games,⁸ or the whole number of “Loading...,” dedicated to the Quebecois digital game field.⁹ The collection *Video Games Around the World* (2015), edited by Mark J.P. Wolf, also follows this emancipatory paradigm.¹⁰

Recently, France has joined the group mentioned above, thanks to the first (and probably not the last) volume of *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France* by Alexis Blanchet and Guillaume Montagnon. The publication has been long-awaited since France is claimed as one of the most vital digital game production centers in Europe.¹¹ At the same time, there is limited knowledge about how the French digital gaming field’s path to greatness played out.¹² Only the term “French Touch,” which referred to a specific cinematic style of narrative presentation and technological innovation, has sunk into the

³ J. Suominen, *How to Present the History of Digital Games: Enthusiast, Emancipatory, Genealogical, and Pathological Approaches*, “Games and Culture” 2017, vol. 12 (6), pp. 544–562; M. Garda, *Nowa historia gier wideo?*, “EKRAŃY” 2016, no. 2, pp. 106–109.

⁴ M. Filiciak, *Poza nostalgię. Zwrot historyczny w badaniach gier i jego konsekwencje*, “Czas Kultury” 2015, no. 2, pp. 91–97.

⁵ T. Donovan, *Replay: The History of Video Games*, Yellow Ant, Lewes 2010.

⁶ J. Kuorikoski, *Finnish Video Games: A History and Catalog*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, NC 2015.

⁷ A. Wade, *Playback: A Genealogy of 1980s British Videogames*, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York 2016.

⁸ J. Švelch, *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2018.

⁹ See an introduction by B. Perron, *Le jeu vidéo au Québec*, “Loading...” 2014, vol. 14 (23), pp. 1–14.

¹⁰ M.J.P. Wolf (ed.), *Video Games Around the World*, The MIT Press, Cambridge–London 2015.

¹¹ P. McQueen, *How France Became a World Leader in Video Games*, “The Culture Trip” 2016, October 21, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/france/paris/articles/how-france-became-a-world-leader-in-video-games/> (accessed: 31.10.2021).

¹² I use the “video game field” term as referring to the whole game production, just like in Brendan Keogh’s article: B. Keogh, *The Cultural Field of Video Game Production in Australia*, “Games and Culture” 2021, vol. 16 (1), pp. 116–135, doi: 10.1177/1555412019873746.

memory of Anglo-American critics.¹³ However, the colloquial understanding of this specific “style” has stopped at the level of selected French games from the 1990s.¹⁴ French journalists and critics also had their share of blame in this, trying to dub the term an actual artistic movement.¹⁵ However, one of them, Alexis Blanchet, has recently deconstructed this narrow take of the French digital game field. Along with Guillaume Montagnon and Sébastien Genvo (who contributed to one chapter), Blanchet published an enormous and highly comprehensive book about the early decades of the French gaming field, *Une histoire*

du jeu vidéo en France. Its scope stretches from 1958 – when French programmer and the future member of French literary group Oulipo, Paul Braffort, designed his first ludic programs – to 1991, marking the release of a highly influential game called *Another World*.

This French-language book comprises five chapters. The first chapter, “L’Informatique ludique en France dans les années 1960 et 1970,” offers new perspectives for understanding how digital games were introduced to France and how such a process differed from the analogous development in the United States. Admittedly, this development started similarly; in both countries, digital games were viewed first as tools helpful for atomic research, though France relied more on civilian forms of using uranium than engaging in the Cold War; while designing simple ludic programs, Braffort mentioned above helped to develop artificial intelligence useful for automatic management of atomic energy.¹⁶ Such understood games were intended merely as barometers of computerized development; the first digital games in France were only adaptations of well-known unplugged games such as *go* and *Nim*. Computers were not treated as entertainment machines, and perhaps because of that, they were not openly distributed on university campuses. Contrary to the United States, where Steve Russell and his colleagues programmed *Spacewar!* (1992) on institutional computers, such an initiative would not be possible in

¹³ A. Watson Brown, *Faites Vos Jeux... Les Jeux Sont Faits*, “I&T Magazine” 1996, no. 19, pp. 6–9.

¹⁴ The term “French Touch” was coined in the 1990s to advertise some French games for international distribution (mainly those by Cryo Interactive), as even the term’s supporter Serge Dupuy-Fromy admits: S. Dupuy-Fromy, *Les jeux vidéo dans la société française: Des années 1970 au début des années 2000*, Université Paris-Est, Paris 2012, p. 189.

¹⁵ D. Ichbiah, *La Saga Des Jeux Vidéo: Enquête Sur Le Nouvel Eldorado Des Jeux Vidéo*, Pocket, Paris 1998; S. Dupuy-Fromy, *Les jeux vidéo dans la société française...*, p. 191; A. Blanchet, *France* [in:] M.J.P. Wolf (ed.), *Video Games Around the World*, op. cit., pp. 175–192; compare another take on the movement: H. Labrande, *Racontons une histoire ensemble: History and Characteristics of French IF* [in:] K. Jackson-Mead, J. Robinson Wheeler, *IF Theory Reader*, Transcript on Press, Boston 2011, p. 412; my arguments about the phrase appear in the following article: F. Jankowski, *Beyond the French Touch: The Contestataire Moment in French Adventure Digital Games (1984–1990)*, “Game Studies” 2021, vol. 21 (1), <http://gamestudies.org/2101/articles/jankowski> (accessed: 31.10.2021).

¹⁶ A. Blanchet, G. Montagnon, *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France 1960–1991: Des labos aux chambres d’ados*, Éditions Pix’n Love, Houstan 2020, pp. 34–37.

France until the late 1970s, let alone the commercialization ignited by American enterprise Atari with its flagship product *Pong* (1972), which abruptly conquered the entertainment market in the 1970s Western Europe.¹⁷

The American as well as Japanese expansion into the French entertainment market is the topic of the next book chapter: “Les jeux vidéo d’arcade en France (1973–2000).” To say that American and Japanese digital games easily enjoyed hegemony in the Western European arcade industry is not a freehand remark. However, Blanchet and Montagnon stress that yet in 1982, the first French-developed original arcade game saw the light: *Le Bagnard* produced by Valadon Automatisation.¹⁸ This *Donkey Kong*-style game featured a prisoner trying to loot gold hidden in an underground state mine. *Le Bagnard* was noted for its tremendous export popularity in Japan as well as in France.¹⁹ Still, *Le Bagnard* as an original French game was exceptional; arcade game production within France had already been dominated by either foreign productions or unauthorized copies of foreign hits.²⁰ The French government’s attitude towards arcade games did not help domestic developers; as late as 1982, gaming machines were taxed, and

the production and import of arcade machines dropped significantly.²¹ As Blanchet and Montagnon claim in the third chapter, “Les premières console des jeux vidéo en France (1978–1985),” the game console market in France also became affected with political pressure under the left-wing François Mitterrand’s government. After the global digital game crash in 1982–1983, mainstream media were relieved by the collapse of the console gaming market, arguing its satisfaction with the containment of cultural pressure from the United States.²²

However, the elaborate fourth chapter of the book, “La micro-informatique et les jeux vidéo en France (1982–1991),” is perhaps the most inspiring. Blanchet and Montagnon, based on numerous interviews and comprehensive source material, demonstrate how heterogeneous the computer gaming market had been. While Mitterrand’s government persecuted console and arcade gaming as forms of hazard, microcomputers were perceived as multi-functional machines ready both for entertainment, office work, and programming. Moreover, the French government made an effort to urge computer game programming as a socially beneficial form of adapting to the computerization of society. As examples, one can cite the experimental, two-year existence of the Octet governmental agency (1983–1985), which subsidized selected gaming software; or the plan “Informatique Pour Tous,” which aimed at equipping schools with home-made

¹⁷ Ibidem, pp. 31–34; see also: W. Audureau, *Pong et la mondialisation. L’histoire économique des consoles de 1976 à 1980*, Pix’n Love Editions, Houdan 2014.

¹⁸ Blanchet made findings about the first arcade game back in 2015: A. Blanchet, *France*, p. 177.

¹⁹ A. Blanchet, G. Montagnon, *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France*, pp. 92–98.

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 76–77.

²¹ V. Charreyron, *Les Arcanes de l’arcade*, “Tilt” 1986, no. 33, pp. 98–103.

²² A. Blanchet, G. Montagnon, *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France*, pp. 189–197.

Thomson computers and introduce informatics education.²³ Although those shy attempts to subsidize the game industry ultimately failed, they at least proved that the minister of culture, Jack Lang, who was responsible for these initiatives, acted in good faith, in line with his policy of subsidizing popular culture.²⁴

Nevertheless, Blanchet and Montagnon stress that the fundamental changes behind the French digital game field were grassroots. The fourth chapter describes how programmers (often after self-studying programming codes) found companies such as Loriciels, Cobra Soft, Ere Informatique, Infogrames, and Froggy Software, and how much those companies differed from each other in terms of publishing policy. Whereas Loriciels started its activity by developing unauthorized copies of foreign arcade blockbusters,²⁵ Froggy Software's portfolio included highly original – if not avant-garde – adventure games.²⁶ Because many programmers worked without publishers' pressure and could switch between different publishing houses (for example, between the mainstream Infogrames or the more innovative Loriciels), new independent *auteurs*²⁷ ap-

peared on the scene, like Eric Chahi and Louis-Marie Rocques.²⁸ The category of *auteurs* rendered some game journalists, who struggled to replicate the cinematic *politique des auteurs*, just like in the cinema.²⁹

If one were to object to the fourth chapter, its weak point would be the attempt to coin the term “New Wave” [*nouvelle vague*] regarding studios such as Coktel Vision, Titus, Microïds, Ubisoft, and Delphine Software.³⁰ Considering that these development studios had better computers than the first game companies, it is nevertheless challenging to distinguish the “New Wave” just based on technological progress, as Blanchet and Montagnon do. It is simply a replacement for the notorious and questionable term “French Touch.” Besides, there is little in common between pioneering anti-colonial projects like *Méwilo* (1987) and *Freedom* (1988), conceived by Mar-

²³ Ibidem, pp. 245–50; see also N. Gilles, *Le Plan «Informatique Pour Tous»*, “Pix 'n Love” 2008, no. 5, pp. 68–71.

²⁴ A. Girard, *French Cultural Policy from André Malraux to Jack Lang: A Tale of Modernisation*, “International Journal of Cultural Policy” 1997, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 116–124.

²⁵ A. Blanchet, G. Montagnon, *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France*, pp. 210–211.

²⁶ Ibidem, pp. 232–233.

²⁷ As Espen Aarseth persuades, the category of *auteurs* can work under three circumstances: an individual should create more than one

game; she should be recognized outside the development studio where she works; and her games should distinguished themselves with a specific game design. See E. Aarseth, *The Game and Its Name: What Is a Game Auteur?* [in:] T. Kragh Grodal, B. Larsen, I. Thorving Laursen (eds.), *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media*, Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen 2004, pp. 261–269.

²⁸ A. Blanchet, G. Montagnon, *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France*, pp. 254–555.

²⁹ See the example of François Coulon and his exaggerated apotheosis of the French game programmers: F. Coulon, *Le Grand Zoo: Paul Cuisset*, “Joystick Hebdo” 1989, no. 9, p. 26; idem, *Le Grand Zoo: Bruno Gourier*, “Joystick Hebdo” 1989, no. 10, p. 26; idem, *Le Grand Zoo: Arbeit von Spacekraft*, “Joystick Hebdo” 1989, no. 11, p. 26.

³⁰ A. Blanchet, G. Montagnon, *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France*, p. 267.

tinican female designer Muriel Tramis, and the games of Delphine Software leader Paul Cuisset, known for plagiarizing various thematic and ludic genres. The cinematic *nouvelle vague* comprised the new generation of filmmakers and brought new cinematic means of expression; the latter ones remain to be defined for digital games.

Similar questions are raised by the fifth chapter, which is perhaps the boldest attempt to define a theme that appears only in French games of the period. “Le jeu d’aventure à la française (1982–1990,” co-written by Sébastien Genvo, shows that French developers not only experimented with technological innovations but brought in content atypical of international mainstream gaming. For example, Jean-Louis Le Breton’s *Paranoïak* raised the issues of mental illnesses, rapidly cutting the links with typically Anglo-Saxon thematic genres like heroic fantasy or science fiction.³¹ Of course, British journalist Tristan Donovan in his book *Replay: The History of Video Games* had already cited this game.³² Nonetheless, Blanchet, Montagnon, and Genvo bring more examples of political games closer to the actual events. These include *Même les pommes de terres ont des yeux* (1985) by Clotilde Marion, which criticized Augusto Pinochet’s rules in Chile; *Chomedu* (1988) by Guy Raynal, which attacked Jacques Chirac’s right-wing cabinet ruling from 1986 to 1988,³³ or the aforementioned *Méwilo*, a settlement with French slavery

and colonialism. Distinctions from the international mainstream also included the French developers’ favorite thematic genres (crime games were incredibly best-selling).³⁴

Notwithstanding, only the science fiction games like the revolutionary point-and-click *L’Arche du Captain Blood* (1987) by Philippe Ulrich and Didier Bouchon and *Another World* (1991) by Chahi ultimately gained an international audience. Despite the oncoming internationalization, the French gaming industry, at least until 1990, explicitly expressed their identity, with a large part of French-developed games set in France (the case of many Froggy Software’s games). Nevertheless, one can ask whether the phrase “le jeu d’aventure à la française” is not a helpful wicket to introduce a replacement for the term “French Touch.”

One thing certainly cannot be denied to Blanchet and Montagnon: systematicity. *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France* includes numerous development studios or individuals who had not figured in previous historical publications on French digital games in its content.³⁵ Much of its content is based upon personal interviews with more than 60 individual game developers, including Bruno Bonnell (the co-founder of Infogrames), Bertrand Brocard (the leader of Cobra Soft), or Laurent Weill (the co-founder of Loriciels). The book’s authors carefully compared various sources and data, reaching even institutional documents

³¹ Ibidem, p. 334.

³² T. Donovan, *Replay*, p. 127.

³³ A. Blanchet, G. Montagnon, *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France*, p. 363.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 346.

³⁵ See the list of development studios in an appendix. Ibidem, pp. 412–423.

from the 1970s and 1980s to discern the government administration's attitude toward the French digital gaming field. Thus, the bibliography supplied in the back matter is satisfying in its complexity. Even though, the inconvenience of the book is the lack of indexes. For a 400-page publication, it takes a long time to get specific information about a game or a creator without indexes.

An unavoidable limitation of the publication – which I point out from my game studies perspective – is the lack of more complex analyses of specific titles. The book glides through individual games, which can prove the erudition of its authors and the inclusion of a wide spectrum of games hitherto overlooked in silence. Still, Blanchet and Montagnon's perspective, deeply rooted in the phenomenon of New Historicism, does little to understand the cultural contexts of the success of such and not other games (e.g., the relationship between *Méwilo* and the postcolonial movement in the 1980s).³⁶

Even though, *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France* stands out as the pivotal work. It comprehensively explains conditions under which the French digital game field expanded within the first three decades. Hopefully, this monograph should also be a reference point for further publications that could notice the events after 1991. From that date, one can note a severe decline in the French gaming field, which lasted more

than a decade,³⁷ without any support of subsequent French cabinets.³⁸ Likewise, much appreciated will be the existence of works that would tell us about the re-birth of the local gaming field. I hope that Blanchet and Montagnon will manage to fill these gaps in French gaming history because the work they have done now is of high quality.

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³⁷ Especially traumatic was the bankruptcy of numerous pioneering studios, such as Lankhor (2001), Infogrames (2001), Delphine Software (2004), Coktel Vision (2005), Titus Software (2005).

³⁸ The French governmental response to the local digital game crisis was retarded, as notes H. Dauncey, *French Videogaming: What Kind of Culture and What Support?*, "Convergence" 2012, vol. 18 (4), pp. 386–387, doi: 10.1177/1354856512439509.

³⁶ See F. Jankowski, *The Presence of Female Designers in French Video Game Industry, 1985–1993*, "Games and Culture" 2020, vol. 15 (6), pp. 677–678, 680, doi: 10.1177/1555412019841954.

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